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"HE IS MY FRIEND."

A Story of President Lincoln and His Private Secretary.

By F. A. MITCHEL.

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In the autumn of 1856 I entered Brown university, the college of Rhode Island. A freshman just entered knows none of his fellow students, not even his own classmates, and is naturally curious concerning those about him. One afternoon soon after my matriculation I was in the room of an upper class man where were half a dozen students listening to a rosy cheeked boy who was firing bits of wit and humor at them with the rapidity of a modern Gatling gun, his shots being received by them with bursts of laughter. I asked who the little fellow was and whether he was in college. Great was my surprise when informed that he was a junior. He had entered at fifteen and was now seventeen. He was from the western state of Illinois.

The Illinoisan, as I shall call him, I soon learned was the shining light of the college. He was so bright that he had no great need to study and possessed a memory to retain all he learned.

I roomed next to a Kentuckian who was a member of the same Greek letter society as the Illinoisan, and there I frequently met the latter. This Kentuckian, a large, handsome fellow, and an Ohioan at this period fought a mock duel, intending it as a hoax for their fellow students. One wintry morning at daylight while the snow was falling they drove across the border of the state, a few miles distant, exchanged blank cartridge shots, and the Kentuckian walked into chapel for prayers with his arm in a sling. His antagonist had poked a hole in his hat.

Meanwhile the Illinoisan was coming to be considered the college genius. Having shown a fancy for writing verses, he was selected to deliver the poem at the exercises held on class day. I can see the slight, youthful figure now after an interval of half a century, graceful in the scholastic gown worn on such occasions, speaking his poem with accompanying gestures in the chapel before an audience largely composed of young men and young women.

The young poet recited his poem in the spring of 1858 and for the next

"ALL I CAN SAY IS THAT HE IS MY FRIEND."

three years was occupied, I believe, at his home in Illinois studying the profession of law. During this period a man was coming from comparative obscurity to exercise an enduring influence upon the nation. Abraham Lincoln was debating with Senator Douglas those questions which were in the end to be determined by the sword. Then came the election of 1860, and Lincoln stepped from the position of an attorney in a small town to the office of president of the United States.

Students who have been friends in college on separating usually write one another for awhile; then their friendship lies dormant for the rest of their lives unless perchance they meet to talk over the golden days of their college course. I had not been especially intimate with the young Illinois poet, for he was of a class two years ahead of mine and of a different college fraternity. But the time was soon to come when I should be brought into closer relation to him. In the summer of 1861 my father was appointed by President Lincoln a brigadier general of volunteers and ordered to report for duty to General McClellan, commanding the Army of the Potomac. I went with my father as lieutenant of a New York regiment, detailed to serve as aid-de-camp on his staff.

On arriving in Washington we put up at the old Willard hotel. One afternoon soon after reaching Washington I saw my Illinois poet for the first time since he was graduated. He was leaning against the cigar stand. There were several of us present who had known him in college, and we all gathered about him, for he had recently been appointed assistant private secretary to President Lincoln.

And now, if not before, it will be recognized that this rosy cheeked boy poet was none other than John Hay.

"This is a big thing you've fallen into, John."

"Yes," he replied, with a twinkle of the eye and his good natured smile, "I'm keeper of the president's conscience."

The youngster with whom we were joking was to spend four years under the influence of the patience, the wisdom and the foresight of the martyr president, being trained the while to execute, after an interval of forty years, an important diplomatic work, and will probably go down in history as the ablest diplomat the United States has produced. Though John Hay possessed the natural ability for his later work, there can be no doubt that he imbibed the patience and learned the methods from his chief while conducting the nation through the most perilous period in its history.

But to return to my story. While John Hay was occupying an office adjoining that of President Lincoln his college friend, the Kentuckian, Clarence Bate of Louisville, had turned rebel and was fighting for the south. In the beginning Kentucky was a divided state. One-half of its people were with the Union, the other half with the Confederacy. It is probable that it was on this account that Bate became identified with one of those bands having no legitimacy as Confederate soldiers who were doing their best to carry the state out of the Union. At any rate, Bate was taken prisoner with arms in his hand against the sovereignty of the United States, having neither a commission nor having been enlisted in the Confederate service.

Later in the war, when one of these "citizens," as they were called, were captured and brought before a commanding officer, after hearing what his captors had to say on the subject, the commander, with a wave of his hand, would say: "Take him away. I don't want to see any more of him." This was an order, understood by the captors, to take the man out and shoot him. The prisoner was then conducted to an open space, told to run and shot down while running.

But Clarence Bate was tried by military court martial and sentenced to be shot.

Bate belonged to a prominent family in Louisville. He had been engaged to be married while in college, but whether he had been married I don't know. There was a quick consultation among his friends. His old friend Hay was close to the president, the only man who by exercising the pardoning power could save his life. There was one chance, and only one, for Bate. That was to secure Hay's influence for a pardon. But was there time? Would Hay feel that his conscience would permit him to ask such a favor? Would the president's conscience permit him to grant it if asked?

Was not John Hay, as he had humorously said, "the keeper of the president's conscience?"

A friend of the condemned man sped to Washington as quick as train could carry him, bearing a request that Hay would do all in his power to save the life of his old friend and brother in the fraternity of which they were both members.

The messenger on his arrival at the capital, having secured an interview with Hay in his office in the White House, presented the request.

What a singular situation! Two students have been together in many a college symposium, have played many a prank in company. A few years pass. Probably they have not met since those happy college days. Suddenly one is handed a request to save the other's life. And more—if he cannot save it his friend must die!

Hay took the letter through a door communicating with the president's private office, leaving the door ajar. The messenger heard indistinctly some conversation between the president and his secretary; then the words, spoken by Hay, "All I can say is that he is my friend."

"Go over to the pardoning office," replied the president, "have a pardon made out, and I will sign it."

John Hay at that time could not have been more than twenty-two or twenty-three years old, for the incident happened at the beginning of the war—1861 or 1862—and Hay was graduated at college in 1858 at the age of nineteen. Fancy a man filled with the generous impulses of youth receiving such a boon, the gift of a life, and that the life of his friend! We can picture the joy beaming in the young man's countenance as he returns to the messenger with the welcome news, the alacrity with which he seeks the pardon office and, when the document is signed, sends it, with an affectionate message, to his college companion.

President Lincoln when a question came up before him for decision wherein a strict construction of duty forbade clemency never hesitated to act on the side of that kindliness which was a part of his nature. He did not seem to dread the blame that would be heaped upon him for interfering with what the world calls justice, or, if he dreaded it, he never permitted it to prevent his sparing a life that depended upon him. Yet all these acts of mercy on account of which his general said that it was impossible to maintain discipline in the army were exercised in cases of soldiers in the ranks. Probably the life of Clarence Bate was the only one spared at the request of one near the president, and no such act has ever been charged against Mr. Lincoln for the purpose of currying favor with a political magnate.

His pupil, Hay, retained to the day of his death that same kindliness for which his preceptor was so distinguished. Doubtless there is not a friend of the great secretary's early life who will not testify to the fact that when he was at the height of his power he felt and acted in accordance with the words:

"He is my friend."

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